

Calindra Hejaran

[EMB: Q1-SF02] Collective Collected

February 10, 2019



Ala'ar Rinn considered his ship's blinking comm light, its chime resonating throughout his piloting cabin. 'Axela, open channel and display on holo,' he called out after a few heartbeats.

A soothing female voice immediately echoed back: 'Opening comm, holo activated,' and the holo image of a cowed figure winked into existence on the dashboard in front of him. The holo image crackled, but the transmission was crisp and strong. A female voice, sounding a bit metallic from across the galaxy, resounded strongly within the Mando's piloting cabin.

"Old friend," it started, the female figure's lips turning into a slight smile. "It has come to my attention that a Collective outpost has gone radio silent near your side of the galaxy. The intercepted transmission, before it went silent

suggests that the outpost has been under attack. Exercise caution but move quickly. We must be the first to investigate," the female insisted, her friendly smile turning into a slight frown, underlining the seriousness of the matter. "Recover any and all valuables or intel on site. I'm

sending the coordinates to you now, unfortunately we don't have much intelligence on the ground there, so you'd be going in blind..."

Ala'ar nodded and considered the information that his computer was receiving. "Moon of Korum," he mumbled as he typed the coordinates into the nav computer. "I have it, Dark Mistress," he said with a polite nod towards the dark figure, "it shall be done as you ask."

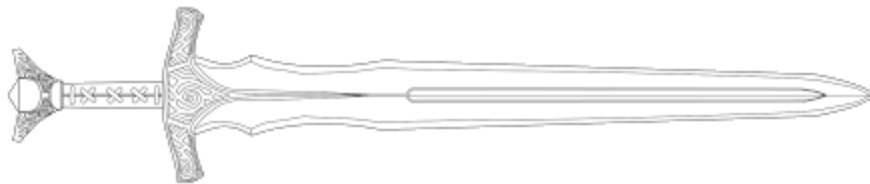
"Very good! I await your report with great anticipation, my friend," there was a slight smile and nod from the dark cowl before the holo image winked out of existence, leaving the NAV computer's beeps and chirps to fill the piloting cabin's silence. When the parsecs and jump points were finally calculated, the blond bounty hunter's piercing blue eyes looked over the projected route; made changes that the computer didn't approve of and overrode them. Shaving four parsecs would be dangerous, but he had to ensure he got there quickly.

Finally satisfied he reconsidered the NAV route one last time, his eyes twinkling with excitement. "Axela! Play NAV playlist four," he said out loud, "we're going to have a hell of a ride..."

Axela's female robotic voice chimed up: "Playing NAV play list four in three, two, one..."

Axela got to zero and Ala'ar activated the hyperdrive, the starfield arching across his ship's canopy, the sound of music flooding the piloting cabin to the general 'yeehaww' of its maverick pilot.

To anyone from another galaxy, the first song sounded suspiciously like Guns n Roses' ["Welcome to the Jungle."](#)



By the time '[Break on Through \(to the Other Side\)](#)' started blaring, Ala'ar had jumped out of hyperspace and headed straight for a part of space that most pilots avoided. This particular area was shrouded in particle clouds and space gases that spiralled out from a dying star whose twin had long ago collapsed into a black hole, swallowing its sister ever so slowly in a light show of colours, dust, and debris from the system's long destroyed planetary bodies.

He entered the field, letting the music guide him and inspire his way forward. He banked left, twirled and spiralled, sliding between a sea of moving rocks and ice crystals, his manoeuvring thrusters blasting suddenly in a different direction as he pulled on the starship's yolk. The music track eventually changed to '[Sweet Dreams \(Are Made of This\)](#)' as he pushed his ship into a Yeager loop from under an asteroid, flying upwards as he circumnavigated it before diving head first into an opening between two swirling giants that collided a few seconds after he'd run the gauntlet between them, finally clearing the field to an uninterrupted view of the hot pink and orange gas vortex as the final star resisted the unavoidable collision that would probably happen long after Ala'ar was himself fallen to dust.

"...I travel the world and the seven seas... Everybody's looking for something..." Ala'ar sang as he banked his ship towards the dying star, hoping to use its gravity to shoot past the two heavenly bodies.

The song continued blaring from the speakers as his trajectory brought him more and more quickly towards a far point across the star. "...Some of them want to use you; some of them want to get used by you; some of them want to abuse you; some of them want to be abused...!"

The star's pull intensified as the song went in a staccato of synthesized sounds and beats, flinging Ala'ar around the star and well on his way from the deadly duo he was leaving in his wake.

The female singer started singing again, the ship's nose dragging blue and orange gas as the ship swerved sideways to "sweet dreams are made of this, who am I to disagree," and Ala'ar nodded his approval as he rejoiced in the thrill and beauty of it all, the stars directly behind him now. He let the ship bank sideways until he saw the opening he was looking for in the asteroid field, and pressed the accelerator before the gravity well could slow him down enough to drag him back with its ungodly appetite for everything and anything that could help it gain enough mass for it to join its dark sister's fall into darkness.

For some reason, Ala'ar's mind remembered a time when he was being chased by a very territorial Krayt Dragon back on Tepassi II, roughly 20 years ago. He had run for dear life, the gigantic reptile running after him like it hadn't eaten for a couple of seasons. The sensation in the pit of his stomach and the tension between his shoulder blades wasn't very dissimilar to the stress of trying to evade the gravity well of the dying star behind him.

That's when he had seen her. The blond woman with the scarf around her shoulders, covering her mouth and nose; wisps of her blond hair waving in the hot desert wind. As if on cue, the wind had suddenly picked up behind him as she waved for him to hurry for the rock formations, when a blood chilling roar resounded directly behind him. He daredn't look back or slow down, his mind screaming that today would be his very last day.

But the end did not come, he had somehow made it almost to the rock formation; he could see the woman more clearly as she focused her attention on the beast behind him as the wind howled and tore at her clothes. He heard and felt the beast slow to a stop and roar again. He didn't dare turn around now to see what was happening -- the ridge a few feet away now. His heart beating frantically in his chest, his legs heavy like lead, he remembered thinking he'd never be able to reach the safety of the rock formation towering before him in time.

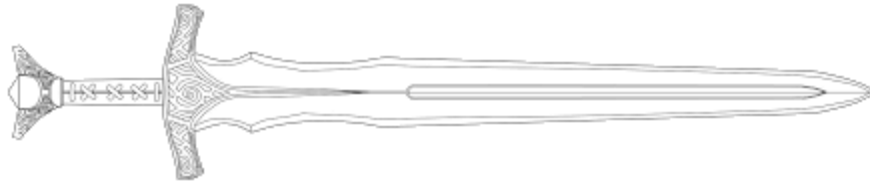
He jumped on the nearest rock, collapsing as his legs finally gave way from under him. That's when he felt something grab him around the waist and he nearly jumped out of his skin, terror overcoming him -- thinking he'd been grabbed by the giant lizard behind him -- only to realize he was moving through the air towards the girl. His body landed gently next to her, too weak to push himself off from the windswept rock.

A wave of nausea came over him, and he fought desperately with his helmet to remove it before he retched ever so elegantly next to his rescuer's boots. He felt her place a reassuring hand on his shoulder, as she crouched next to him to help him sit.

"Not everyday you outrun a Krayt dragon during mating season and live to tell about it," she said. He didn't detect any sarcasm in her voice, only empathy. "Your mind was ready for death, it'll take a bit for your legs to work again. Here, have some water," she said as she placed her canteen to his lips.

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He tried to reach for it with his hand, but it never obeyed. The only reason his mouth had opened was because he was too exhausted to close it. He swallowed feebly and groaned his thanks before the darkness overtook him.



Once he had cleared the second half of the debris field, Ala'ar relaxed and let the computer do the rest of the trip. It was routine compared to the shortcut he'd taken, and he needed some rest after all that excitement.

He got out of the pilot seat and headed for his bunk. "Axela, end music. Set alarm for 10 minutes prior to arrival." He fell asleep and slept, darkness taking him again as it often did.

His alarm went off seemingly too soon, but looking at the time on wall, he had slept for nearly eleven hours. He felt refreshed and hungry, so he grabbed his favourite cup and warmed up a ration pack from his food reserves.

Ala'ar was used to the lonely long hauls, and he made sure he had everything he liked at hand, including his favourite hot drink: a dark, unctuous and spicy-semi sweet chocolatey drink that tantalized his taste buds and slid down his throat like silk. His world seemed to refocus as the drink warmed him up from within, radiating comfort and awareness as his mind reconnected with reality as he made his way back to the field of stars waiting for him in the piloting cabin.

He secured the lid on his cup and cradled it into its holder, then unceremoniously slumped into his chair as he bit down on a piece of his ration. There were seconds left on the nav computer, so he tore into a huge piece of his ration, before the field of stars coalesced into the familiar sight of stars on a black canvas.

He considered the system in front of him with a passive eye. The system's blue super giant that had cast a cold light on everything around it had long ago went supernova, leaving behind it a largely desolate and broken system, most of its planets destroyed several millennia ago. The result was a cold white neutron star, orbited by six barren planetary bodies in various stages of decay, slowly transforming into an elaborate asteroid field.

It wasn't the first time that Ala'ar wondered at this particular region of space, and why almost every system seemed to be collapsing on itself. The good thing about it was that the more people wanted to build secret outposts, the more people needed pilots like Ala'ar with the balls to navigate all the spatial anomalies, especially when the plan was to come in by the back door unannounced.

He took his cup of spiced chocolate, enjoying the smell and the warmth as he concentrated his sensors on the main point of entry that people were likely to use on the far side of the system. Perhaps he'd be lucky enough to capture transponder codes and engine signatures, at the very least he'd get advanced warning if anyone else decided to investigate.

"Axela, do passive scans of the entire system please," he said suddenly. "Time to get as much footage as we can for our benefactor."

Calindra paced the deck as the information her operative had gathered was being downloaded. From the preliminary pictures, the Collective base was dark, but there was no real structural damage to its exterior. Inside, however, it looked like a massacre.

Pictures of Collective soldiers and personnel with blaster burns to their faces or chests crossed her panel. Something about it bothered her, but she couldn't put her finger on it.

"I think someone decided to leave and met some resistance," came Ala'ar's musings over the comm, "the soldiers look like they were trying to defend the hangar bay."

'Of course!' she thought, suddenly putting the finger on what had been bothering her. "That certainly supports the lack of forced entry. Any survivors?"

Ala'ar's blue eyes suddenly looked amused. "Why yes," he added the amusement clearly on his voice now, "some squint nearly wet himself with relief when he saw I wasn't a Collective agent. He's ready to sing like a Alderaanian finch bird. We've also got our hands on the base's data core," he lifted the drive for her to see.

Calindra whistled appreciatively, "Good work! I'll send you double what I normally give you. Bring back the scientist and the Collective dat--" the transmission suddenly cut out.

'Someone else had likely decided to investigate,' she thought worriedly at the sudden end to the transmission. She privately hoped that her operative would succeed in evading the enemy, but there wasn't much she could do from the comforts of her quarters, so she continued working on the files in front of her, wondering what could have possibly broken out of that outpost.